

**Adaptive Leadership Theories Applied to the North Atlantic Treaty
Organization (NATO)**

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“And I think to be in NATO for the countries of our region, it means more guarantees for us, it means more responsibility for our common security, but it means fulfillment of all standards of civilized world, like protection of human rights and democratic mechanisms.”

- Aleksander Kwaśniewski, President of Poland 1995-2005

This quote and many others like it have been celebrated over the past twenty years as former Warsaw Pact countries have petitioned for, gained admittance, and been integrated into the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). The world has witnessed NATO embrace its former adversaries as if the Cold War never happened and its politicians in Brussels and Washington open their arms and welcome the change. The spread of democracy, myriad economic possibilities, reduced military expenditures, and the exploitation of previously untapped natural resources are a few of the possibilities that have been attempted or achieved over the past twenty years. Preceding the fall of the Berlin Wall, NATO had a clear and unified understanding of their primary threat and mission: quite simply, defend Western Europe from a Soviet led attack. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union a new mission or central focus has not been established and this has caused NATO to struggle with its identity.

Only recently has NATO adopted a plan of action for 21st-century security threats that draws on both the recent lessons of Afghanistan and the alliance's longer experience with defense by deterrence. NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen was recently quoted saying that NATO's new strategic concept was the road map for the organization's next ten years and that the alliance was not irrelevant, but as effective as ever. The strategic concept, which is NATO's first mission statement in more than a decade, elevates the role of political and civilian answers to security challenges. For the first time the military alliance will create a small civilian component to assist the military side in future interventions such as the one in Afghanistan. The strategic concept also makes clear that NATO will maintain its nuclear deterrent to ward off

conventional threats even as it adapts to face newer challenges like cyber-security, terrorism, and failed states.¹

Decisions made at the Lisbon Summit in late 2010 and the establishment of the new strategic concept, are actions taken by the NATO Alliance to finally adjust its cold war paradigms. That being said, NATO Secretary Generals have made grandiose statements before and then failed to deliver on their promises. Historically, NATO has proven that it is incapable of defining what it considers its main threat and has not adequately integrated new members into its political and military structures. These failures are directly linked to the organization's inability to effectively lead itself in the culturally diverse European environment. To solve its organizational problems NATO must consider various adaptive leadership theories and strive to implement relevant and needed changes to their structures, policies, and most importantly leadership capacity if they intend to maintain relevancy as a credible and key component of European and global security plans.

I recently served for over two years as Aide-de-Camp to the senior U.S. Army General in NATO; this allowed me to gain an intimate knowledge and understanding of the organization's leading personalities. I was privy to information, documents, and decisions at the highest level and experienced firsthand the process of how decisions were made at the macro level. NATO Headquarters in Brussels, Belgium, the Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE) in Mons, Belgium, along with a large supporting cast of NATO and other international agencies, a few specialized subordinated military headquarters, national capitols of the Alliance member nations, and non-governmental agencies comprise the NATO environment. It is a large, bureaucratic, and diverse organization with multiple competing agendas, ideas, and cultures.

¹ Howard LaFranchi, *NATO tries to reinvent itself at Lisbon Summit*, (Christian Science Monitor, 2010) <http://www.csmonitor.com/Commentary/the-monitors-view/2010/1118/NATO-tries-to-reinvent-itself-at-Lisbon-summit> (accessed March 6, 2011).

Although NATO is a multinational organization, its structure as described provides the framework for this discussion on leadership theories and their application. Generally speaking, discussing NATO and its culture and leadership issues is similar to discussing the U.S. interagency process as the issues faced in both systems are strikingly similar.

The standing challenges and institutional factors that NATO routinely confronts and juggles include; understanding of partner capabilities, language barriers, differing and acceptable levels of professional training, differing and acceptable levels of operational training and experience, national politics, and a general lack of resources. These challenges do not stand alone, but are bound together by NATO's organizational culture. This culture exacerbates these challenges and hampers the progressive desires of the Alliance. It seems counterintuitive to state that NATO has a problem understanding cultural differences, when the majority of the Alliance is comprised of European nations that have experienced war and peace for centuries. It is logical to assume that they have a good idea of each other's culture. With that being said, significant cultural differences exist between the northern, southern, and eastern regions of Europe which in turn define the national, political, and military interests of the nations in those regions. The U.S. and Canada are most similar in culture with the northern nations of Europe and are therefore considered part of the northern region in this discussion.

The friction that exists between these regions represents a significant challenge; the inability to look past cultural differences prevents the Alliance from moving forward with a new strategy. Witnessing this friction firsthand was disconcerting; some of the least tolerant and most rigid people were the senior leaders of the various NATO headquarters, agencies, and nations. These are the people expected to break down barriers, provide leadership, and solve problems, not reinforcing failure with continued ignorance and intolerance. The question arises

as to why this paradigm exists and how so many senior leaders could be supporting the paradigm with their actions. Initially I considered simple explanations such as political games and petty disputes, but quickly came to the realization that the friction was culturally driven.

In his book *Organizational Culture and Leadership*, Edgar Schein states that the culture of a group can be defined as a pattern of shared basic assumptions that was learned as a group as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, and that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems.² This definition of culture resonated with my experiences in NATO because it embodies the true essence of the leadership problems vexing the organization. Simply stated, NATO has faced substantial external adaptation issues since the collapse of the Soviet Union because it has not been able to fully justify its purpose to its members and the world. Additionally, NATO has faced tremendous internal challenges as the continued integration of former enemies makes establishing consensus virtually impossible. NATO's newest members bring their own culture which directly conflicts with the northern region nations that defined NATO culture for the duration of the Cold War. One example of this conflict is the differing opinion on what type of military officer to send to NATO's command structure. The former Warsaw Pact countries tend to send light infantry and logistical officers, whereas the northern nations tend to send a diversified array of its officers. This disparity is routinely discussed with the intent of establishing guidelines within the alliance for ensuring more equitable contributions to the command structure. Progress remains dormant on this topic because the eastern nations do not have the resourcing, or experience in their officer corps to offer more than a light capability. This example is representative of dozens more conflicts that hamper the alliance's efforts to establish a comprehensive and synchronized plan for the future.

² Edgar Schein, *Organizational Culture and Leadership*, 3rd ed., (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1995), 45.

Working in the upper echelons of the Alliance's command structure gave me the perspective and insights needed to discuss the organizational failures or difficulties experienced by NATO with regards to the application of leadership in a diverse organizational culture. Adaptive leadership theories if applied correctly can be effective, efficient, and holistic in nature. To better organize any strategy it is essential that the characteristics of the adaptive leadership theories selected are linked to a theme or function of NATO's culture. Dissecting the NATO environment produces three distinct categories: institutional, status quo, and the future. Ultimately, it is necessary to group the relevant characteristics of the various adaptive leadership methodologies and craft them into a workable and sustainable theory unique to the NATO problem set.

When considering NATO as an institution, the adaptive leadership theories of Edgar Schein and Howard Gardner are particularly useful. The period of time between the collapse of the Soviet Union and the beginning of the Global War on Terror was a transitional time for NATO or as Schein describes, an unfreezing and movement period. The unfreezing was the collapse of the Soviet Union and the movement is the unclear mission that followed. NATO has attempted to redefine itself over the past twenty years and to some extent this effort is ongoing. To address this issue a possible strategy would be to inculcate NATO's leadership with the basic underpinnings of Schein's work in order to provide a baseline understanding of NATO's current organizational culture to its leaders. By providing an understanding of the how and why behind their own organizational culture, work could commence on changing it to better address current issues. Contemporary leaders must learn to see the world through cultural lenses and become competent in cultural analysis. This means being able to perceive and decipher the competing forces that operate in groups, organizations, and occupations. Once leaders learn to see the

world through cultural lenses, all kinds of things begin to make sense that were initially mysterious, frustrating, or seemingly stupid.³ This statement captures the essence of what NATO is missing with regards to understanding their organizational culture and if embraced there would not only be less frustration, but increased productivity in the form of quicker and better decisions.

The ultimate goal of any reform strategy should be to convince all members of NATO to acknowledge and embrace the organization's long standing institutional culture and work to integrate their own cultures into it. Schein says this best by stating, if we understand the dynamics of culture, we will be less likely to be puzzled, irritated, and anxious when we encounter the unfamiliar and seemingly irrational behavior of people in organizations, and we will have a deeper understanding not only of why various groups of people or organizations can be so different, but also why it is so hard to change them.⁴ Schein provides the theory behind a feasible strategy, but Gardner provides the vehicle needed for its delivery. In his book *Leading Minds*, Howard Gardner describes the need for a leader to have a central message or story. He goes on to state that the story is more likely to be effective in a large group if it can speak directly to the untutored mind. Stories ought to address the sense of individual and group identity, the *I* and *they*. They should not only provide background, but should help group members to frame future options.⁵

NATO Secretary Generals are chosen and appointed by the North Atlantic Council; unfortunately they often fail because they refuse to acknowledge the cultural differences within NATO and are therefore ineffective at leading organizational change. NATO must find and

³ Edgar Schein, *Organizational Culture and Leadership*, 3rd ed., (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1995), 56.

⁴ Edgar Schein, *Organizational Culture and Leadership*, 3rd ed., (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1995), 87.

⁵ Howard Gardner, *Leading Minds: An Anatomy of Leadership*, (Glenview, ILL: Basic Books, 2005), 24.

appoint a leader that can effectively operate in the diverse political world of Brussels without bringing personal bias into play. This leader must possess the ability to communicate messages in a way that all can understand and internalize. Good examples of potential candidates for the position of NATO Secretary General are former leaders of the nations that have been recently integrated and have the recent experiences with the challenges of entering into and working in the culturally diverse environment that is NATO. A leader of this type would possess the necessary traits and most importantly story of what they did to succeed, to lead NATO through the movement phase as Schein describes it and posture the organization at the necessary level for it to be refreezed.

The status quo category of NATO's culture revolves around its daily operations as a global political and military entity. This concept encompasses everything from the paying of bills to the process used for drafting and implementing policy. The manner in which these tasks are accomplished is a strict process bound by existing NATO culture. NATO is most constrained by its greatest strength, which is the fact that in order for the alliance to do anything, a unanimous vote is required. This reality makes it very difficult for leadership to flourish because a good idea aimed at organizational change remains just that, most of the good ideas and statements circulated around NATO die on the vine because they are contentious with one or more entities, take people out of their comfort zones, or attack the standing bureaucracies. Compromise is the name of the game in NATO and it behooves potential leaders to know and understand this concept. In Beryl Radin's book *The Accountable Juggler*, she tables the difficulties of leading an organization while juggling multiple complexities. In the case of NATO, the complexities are the range of operational norms and the processes that they follow.

In order to be effective, a leader must be able to juggle different challenges, manage expectations, understand the differing accountability processes, and operate inclusively. Radin states that a leader must respond to three types of accountability expectations: policy, politics, and processes. She goes on to state that it is likely that each will pull a leader in a different direction. What makes sense to the actors who make demands in one area may be inappropriate to those involved in another of the elements. There is breadth and depth to the various accountability expectations and they go beyond the traditional views about accountability. Leaders must not only satisfy the formal and legal requirements attached to their role, but also deal with expectations that have political consequences.⁶

A strategy to change the status quo category of NATO's culture requires the organization's leadership to first consider its internal processes and how they are constrained by it. Layering Radin's concepts on top of the existing NATO culture creates a model that highlights the gaps where operational norms could potentially affect the organization. To manage this complex model the leader must be an accountable juggler, someone who knows how to balance multiple actors and pressures and develop personally as the organization grows. This requires a leader who is highly skilled, able to listen to the cacophony of voices around them, and capable of adapting to constantly changing circumstances.⁷ For NATO to affect change in its operational norms to improve efficiency and effectiveness it must enlist the services of this type of leader.

A great organization is one that delivers superior performance and makes a distinctive impact over a long period of time.⁸ The refreezing and beyond category of NATO's culture is the apex of any strategy. Specifically focusing on NATO's leaders and their individual

⁶ Beryl Radin, *The Accountable Juggler: The Art of Leadership in a Federal Agency*, (CQ Press, 2002), 12.

⁷ Beryl Radin, *The Accountable Juggler: The Art of Leadership in a Federal Agency*, (CQ Press, 2002), 18.

⁸ Jim Collins, *Good to Great and the Social Sector*, (Harper Collins, 2006), 5.

leadership qualities makes it possible to identify the nexus of the organization's shortcomings. NATO will eventually solve its challenges with regards to determining future threats, streamlining internal processes, and solidifying their position in the global political arena. The concern however is that once this occurs, the possibility exists for the culture to thaw and return to its former self unless there is a leader in place to enforce compliance. The type of leader needed is one that understands discipline as well as the risks associated with being a leader. Jim Collins describes leadership hierarchy as a pyramid with executive or Level 5 leadership as the top of the pyramid. He goes on to state that Level 5 leadership is not about being soft or nice or purely inclusive or consensus-building. The point of Level 5 is to make sure the right decisions happen, no matter how difficult or painful, for the long-term greatness of the institution and the achievement of its mission, independent of consensus or popularity.⁹ When NATO decides to refreeze its culture it must place strong leaders in the appropriate positions and with the necessary authority to keep the freezer door closed. Inability to do this allows for advocates of the legacy culture to chip away at the organization's progress and inject their dated ideas. The right leader can prevent this by building coalitions, populating the organization with the right people, embodying disciplined thought, and demanding disciplined action.

Success breeds support and commitment, which breeds even greater success, which breeds more support and commitment. People like to support winners. NATO has not found its champion and continues to struggle in the global arena. Its commitments in Afghanistan and Iraq are in line with policy, but cause contentious and circular debates in the capitols of the Alliance member nations. NATO's champion must also understand the risks associated with their leadership decisions and how to stay relevant in the complex political environment. You disturb people when you take unpopular initiatives, put provocative new ideas on the table in

⁹ Jim Collins, *Good to Great and the Social Sector*, (Harper Collins, 2006), 8.

your organization, question the gap between colleagues' values and behavior, or ask people to face up to tough realities.¹⁰ Any strategy that is embraced by NATO requires a hybrid leader that understands the situation and can appropriately respond to threats against their leadership while remaining anchored to the organization and its people.

Defining NATO's culture by the three categories of institutional, the status quo, and the future provides a framework for considering a strategy to improve the organization's culture. Utilizing the characteristics of adaptive leadership theories enables the dynamic crafting of a hybrid leadership theory, unique to the NATO problem set, that when applied to NATO's challenges brings leadership to bear in a more effective, efficient, and holistic manner. If NATO is to overcome its fundamental misunderstanding of how to apply leadership to its own culture, then it must address its organizational culture problems.

¹⁰ Ronald A. Heifetz and Marty Linsky, *Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive through the Dangers of Leading*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 2002), 34.

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